

# Swampland

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Translated by: Franklin Ma

It was a rainy afternoon when I discovered a small oil painting in one of the exhibition halls. Now, “discovered” may be an overstatement, but this unassuming painting only seemed to be purposely placed in the poorest-lit corner of the room, contained within the feeblest of frames, as if somebody had forgotten they placed it there. The painting was titled “Swampland,” whose artist was no one famous nor had any merits to his name. The painting itself depicted nothing more than turbid water, damp earth, and the vegetation that flourished upon it. Any ordinary exhibition visitor would, quite literally, not spare it even a single glance.

Strangely enough, this artist also forfeited any brush of green when painting the overgrown plants. All the reeds, poplars, and fig trees were expressed merely in a muddy yellow: a heavy, stifling yellow reminiscent of wet plaster. Perhaps this was how the artist perceived the colours of plants. Or perhaps he liked another part of the painting, and deliberately chose to make such an exaggeration. — As I stood before the painting, enjoying the impressions arising within me, I couldn’t help but ponder his intentions.

Yet therein the painting hid an incredible force. I slowly came to this realization. Look at the expression of the soil in the foreground. The mud has been so precisely painted that I could almost feel the sensation of my feet treading over it. I make a step, and hear the squeelch of the surface parting as my heels sink into the mire. Through this small oil painting, I discovered the wretched condition of an artist desperately trying to capture the essence of nature. And then, just as with any other excellent piece of art, through these yellow marshland plants, a rapturous sense of triumph against adversity overcame me. Among all the paintings of various sizes in this venue, I couldn’t find a single one that could rival the power contained within this marshland.

“You seem quite impressed.”

At these words, accompanied by a tap on the shoulder, I felt as if my heart was being shaken out, and quickly turned around.

“How do you think of this?”

The speaker, with a freshly razored chin, casually gestured towards the swampland painting. He was broad-shouldered and wore a fashionable brown suit, and styled himself as an art insider — a newspaper art critic. I remember having unpleasant encounters with him in the past, so I reluctantly replied.

“It’s a masterpiece.”

“A master ... piece? Now that’s interesting.”

The critic let out a hearty laugh, startling some nearby visitors who turned to look at us in unison. I was irked.

“That’s interesting, because originally this painting wasn’t from one of our members. The painter kept on pleading to exhibit it here like a broken record, so after his death his family made a request to the judges and finally got his painting hung in this little corner.”

“After his death? So the artist’s dead?”

“Indeed. Well, he was practically dead even when he was alive.”

My curiosity slowly overcame my annoyance.

“Why?”

“Because he went mad a long time ago.”

“Even when he painted this?”

“Of course. Who would draw a painting with these colours if they weren’t mad? Yet you call it a masterpiece. That’s what makes it so interesting.”

The critic laughed out loud again, seeming quite pleased with himself. Perhaps he thought I would be ashamed of my own ignorance. Or even more, perhaps he tried to impress upon me his superior sense of appreciation of the arts. But both his expectations were for naught; because as I heard him talk, an inexplicably solemn yet reverent feeling surged within me and washed over my whole soul and spirit. Once again, I fixed my gaze at the swampland painting in awe. Looking closer within this small canvas, I once again found the pitiful figure of an artist tormented by incredibly dreadful anxiety and agitation.

“He probably went mad because he couldn’t paint the way he wanted to. At least in this regard, his work is worth buying.”

The critic smiled with a bright face, looking almost happy. This was the one and only reward that the nameless and unknown artist — one of us — had obtained from society at the cost of his own life. I felt a strange shiver run through my entire body as I peered at the melancholic oil painting for the third time. There, between the gloomy sky and water grew the plaster-coloured reeds, poplars, and fig trees, living with such a fierce intensity that it was like looking at nature itself ...

“It’s a masterpiece.”

I looked at the critic straight in the face, and proudly repeated these words.

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